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ABSTRACT

Recent attention to literacy, rather than focusing on literacy for social mobility as in the 1960s, promotes literacy for basic, entry-level employment, a position that supports the existing power structure rather than redistributing power in our society. Therefore true universal literacy--which involves the potential redistribution of power--is being threatened in a number of ways: (1) nonliterate adults are being stereotyped as unable to grow and learn and barely able to cope with life; (2) nonliterate adults are being denied any active role in creating programs to meet their needs; (3) "literacy" resources are being used with adults whose skills already may be fairly sophisticated; and (4) workplace literacy programs sometimes simply train adults for specific tasks rather than help them learn to read, write, solve problems, and continue learning. The challenge for those who can influence the distribution of resources is to find some way to make a serious commitment to addressing literacy development as a complex issue, to stop putting social issues in competition with each other, and to work to promote a broad notion of literacy that embraces the growth of the human spirit, recognizing that full participation in the economy will accompany such personal growth. (NH)

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THE POLITICS OF ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

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Adult literacy education always has been political -- choices about who reads, what they read, and how they use what they read always have been connected to the distribution of power in a society. From ancient times we find literacy systematically denied to those the ruling elite want to maintain in a position of subjugation, and literacy used as a means of social control. This is evident in laws forbidding slaves' learning to read, voter registration literacy tests, and the current move to control the content of textbooks on moral grounds.

Literacy is not some naturally occurring object, like stone or soil or water or air. It is a social construct -- it is defined and created by those in power in a society, and those definitions change as conditions change. Thus, literacy is considered historically and culturally relative; definitions of literacy depend on time and place (although they always are decided upon by those in positions of power). As the definitions shift, membership in the categories of "literate" and "illiterate" changes, and the rewards and stigma attached to membership in each category change as well. Discussion about the relative nature of literacy usually takes place in an academic context, abstract and divorced from present practice. However, I believe that the definitions, categories and criteria are changing right now -- and that it is up to us to choose our roles, from passive viewers to active participants in the process.

Many of us have been working in adult literacy education since the 1960s when federal legislation first created the Adult Basic Education program; we were operating then in an environment in which it was fashionable to speak of a "social consciousness" and a number of fundamental social issues were addressed through new policies. Education -- including literacy skills -- was seen as part of the foundation necessary to enable individual social mobility in

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our society; improvement of the standard of living -- an economic issue -- and the quality of life -- a personal, subjective issue -- were national goals.

Illiteracy was a social problem during the 1960s to the extent that it was viewed as contributing to social unrest; the economy was expanding and literacy was viewed as a prerequisite for persons who had been disenfranchised to reap their share of the rewards of a bountiful nation. It was the key to moving up and out of the ghetto, up and out of labor-intensive jobs and up and out of the ranks of the poor. Literacy education was designed to support the expanding economy by moving adults into the "mainstream."

Then we entered a period called by many, "retrenchment." Funding for literacy programs, always minimal, became scarce. As the economy contracted and the economic status of those in power appeared to be threatened, opportunities for others to move into their ranks narrowed. Social programs and issues of social justice no longer had a central place in mainstream political rhetoric.

In the last couple of years the context has changed again. The role of literacy in supporting economic development once more is being highlighted; talk about adult literacy education once more is being transformed into political capital. But there are some important differences from twenty years ago.

I know that you all are aware of the current line of reasoning that places adults who need to develop their literacy skills in a causal relationship to current economic problems. These adults, presumed to be unable to work in the workplaces of the future, keep America from ascending to the top of the new post-industrial, technological age, global order. Most obviously, these arguments ignore the realities of social class and social structure. They also ignore the complex web of forces contributing to the United States' present economic problems -- adults who cannot read and write well are by far more the victims of these forces than their cause! Nonetheless, the tight connection established between literacy and economic development provides the framework within which we see the current attention to literacy education.

However, today's political talk about literacy is not about "empowerment" of people who are poor and disenfranchised; it is about maintaining the present distribution of wealth and power in America and, even more, across the planet. The claim is being made that the skills needed for the lowest level of jobs has shifted -- or is in the process of shifting. This is not about literacy for social mobility, but is about literacy for basic, entry-level employment. These

arguments focus only secondarily on improving the quality of life for individuals and communities; primarily they emphasize maintaining the pre-existing standard of living in America. In other words, in the center of this talk of change and the future lies the image of the status quo.

But how can this be? Persons who have been denied power and devalued are the focus of efforts to provide them with tools that provide access to power -- if only functional power by virtue of their now being able to do things they could not do previously. These efforts potentially undermine literacy as a tool of the power elite -- but this attention to literacy is oriented to supporting the existing power structure rather than to redistributing power in our society. Thus, a dilemma is posed -- there seems to be a fundamental underlying contradiction -- because of the potential social consequences of universal literacy.

As a result, we must be sensitive to a number of ways in which any potential redistribution of power -- and, therefore, true literacy -- is being undermined. First, nonliterate adults are taught that they are the problem through the continued propagation of destructive stereotypes and assumptions, including: that nonliterate adults cannot inform themselves about political, social and economic issues; that they must rely upon the help of others to negotiate commonplace daily life tasks; that they are swayed easily by propaganda and demagoguery; and that they are socially isolated, alienated, and impotent. Most fundamentally, nonliterate adults are viewed as unable to grow and learn and barely able to cope with daily life. Our challenge is to find ways to take advantage of new opportunities but, at the same time, not to add to the problem by supporting these false and destructive stereotypes, and to create a more constructive, respectful and potent view of nonliterate adults.

Second, we must understand that American mainstream culture still tends to equate nonliteracy with "primitive," undeveloped, or simply incapable minds. Nonliterate adults are viewed as needing to be cared for, much as young children are seen as being dependent on adults, rather than as being able to participate as equals in decisions about their lives. Therefore, they are not viewed as having an active role in creating programs to meet their needs, but rather as passive recipients of services. It is difficult to transcend thousands of years of social conditioning to remember that literacy does not define dependency. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the importance of collaboration with learners -- in program development and instruction -- and we must work hard to make collaboration a cornerstone of literacy efforts.

Third, we are moving away from a dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy to a notion of continuing literacy development. I think this is a positive movement, on the whole, but it legitimizes using "literacy" resources to work with adults whose skills already may be fairly sophisticated, but, in the context of a certain set of job demands, may require still greater development. These are adults already established in the mainstream society and participating at a fairly high level. The danger is that resources will be diverted from those with fewer skills, using the justification that it is too resource-intensive to connect them to the available employment opportunities. We must remain committed to working with those adults who have the most minimal skills. Although we have to think in terms of lifelong literacy development -- for all of us -- as part of our lifelong learning process, we also have to remember that the potential consequences of such development may be more threatening when they include helping previously nonliterate adults find their voice as a political constituency.

Fourth, finally there appears to be widespread recognition of the important role of background knowledge and context for effective teaching and learning. However, in many instances this is being narrowly translated into prescriptive workplace literacy programs and adults' family, personal and civic lives, their most fundamental contexts, often are dismissed. Such workplace literacy programs flirt with the danger of simply training adults for specific tasks rather than helping them learn to read, write, solve problems, and continue learning. We need to develop a more politicized understanding of workplace literacy, incorporating a critical perspective on the power relationships in the workplace and the functions of literacy in the relationship between workers and their employers, as well as integrating a far more complex definition of functional context.

Of course, any action on the part of literacy educators presupposes a proactive stance with local, state and federal policy makers. Many of us are feeling a bit overwhelmed these days with the activity in our local areas, our states and at the federal level. It is difficult, often, simply to feel informed about it, never mind to feel that it is possible to take a role shaping it. Many of us entered this field primarily because we care about people, about service and education, about the quality of life and about social justice, but we were drawn to practice rather than to policy making. For many years, we felt that we could afford to ignore advocacy roles, and that we could ignore each other.

Those days are over. Our profession is being redefined for us -- by the media, by Chambers of Commerce, by mayors and governors and legislators and business owners -- and the process will continue because it is viewed as related to the quality of life for mainstream America. We must rise to this challenge intelligently, politically, and with a generous spirit of collaboration.

Policy makers, or those working in local, state or federal government positions, have been struggling to understand that literacy is more than a set of reading and writing skills and that literacy development is a complex issue requiring far more than a "quick fix" if there is to be any real change. Unfortunately, dealing with complicated issues in a complicated way is not particularly among the strengths of most governments!

Therefore, the challenge for those who can influence the distribution of resources is to find some way to make a serious, long-term commitment to addressing literacy development as a complex issue -- to approach it in a comprehensive way, to develop comprehensive policies. It is time to stop putting social issues in competition with each other -- the "social issue of the year" approach has got to go -- and to begin developing policies that reflect the inter-relatedness of all of these issues.

The current mainstream orientation to literacy depicts nonliterate adults as different -- fundamentally different -- and not OK. True progress in literacy will only come, however, when we realize that we're all folks, in the end. We all must work together to promote a broad notion of literacy that embraces the growth of the human spirit, recognizing that full participation in the economy will accompany such personal growth.

Only when we focus on what we share in common -- literacy educators from all organizations, policy makers, learners -- and find the courage to name and confront our differences, only then can we begin reconstructing the politics of adult literacy education in America.

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